

THE BELTHAZOR CHRONICLES

Charmed Fanfiction by AmandaK

Master Plan

"Idiots. Idiots! I am surrounded by IDIOTS!!" The Source's voice grew louder and louder until the walls of the underground cavern shook with his rage. In the antechamber Raynor exchanged uncomfortable looks with two of his fellow Brotherhood members. The Source was losing his temper and that never bode well for the creatures of the Underworld. Perhaps this was not a good time to pitch his idea.

"Raynor! Get in here!" the Source barked.

Raynor flinched. It was too late to reconsider. It didn't escape his notice that the other demons avoided meeting his eyes nor did he miss the wary step they took away from him. The message was clear: he couldn't expect any support from them, despite the blood oath that bound them. If the Source didn't buy his plan, this was going to be his final hour.

Raynor squared his shoulders. He collected his courage, pulled the cowl a little further over his head and walked past the guard.

Inside his chamber the Source paced with short, angry strides. Behind him, flames leapt up at the ceiling in sync with his footfalls. A robed figure stood in front of the Source, his head down in submission. Raynor recognized him: Marax. A high ranking demon, a Brother, who had been charged with seducing a mortal to reveal the location of a sacred amulet. It looked as if he had not succeeded.

"There you are," the Source grunted. He directed his stare at Raynor.

The powerful demon inclined his head. "I'm at your service, Master," he said.

"Are you?" the Source asked.

Raynor held his tongue; it was not a question that he should answer.

"We shall see. This fool here," the Source pointed sharply at the demon before him, "has failed me. Your Brotherhood has failed me."

Marax raised his head and opened his mouth to protest.

"SILENCE!" the Source roared and Marax' jaws snapped shut with an audible click.

"Marax has availed nothing," Raynor said, calmer than he felt, "because he does not understand humans. None of us do."

"Idiots," the Source murmured. "That's because you're all idiots."

Raynor hesitated. "I beg to differ." He held his breath, waiting for the inevitable blowout and the hot, scorching fire.

It never came. He risked a glance at the hooded figure of the Source. His master stood motionless, stiff. Raynor snatched his chance. "We are not idiots," he continued quickly. "We are... different from mortals. Their emotions and their innate sense of good are alien to us. We have studied them for over four thousand years. But even if we study them for another forty centuries, we will still not understand."

"So, tell me, my loyal servant," the Source said. His tone was light but Raynor could sense the underlying threat. "Are you suggesting we have been defeated?"

"No! Certainly not." Raynor shook his head vigorously. "However, perhaps it is time to try a different tack."

"I'm listening," the Source said. He folded his arms in front of his chest.

"If you'll allow me," Raynor said, "I would like to introduce someone to you. A... protegee of mine, so to speak." He gestured at Marax. "The girl. Get her."

The Source, whose curiosity was stronger than his anger, settled himself on the high chair in the middle of the room. He rearranged his robes around him and waited in silence.

Raynor continued. "To subjugate the human race," he said, "we need someone who understands what makes them tick. Someone who can think like them, who can anticipate and predict their responses. We need someone who has human blood."

"What?" the Source growled, jumping back up from his seat. "Are you suggesting we bring a human into our fold? Even if you could find one that was willing, they wouldn't last a week."

Raynor allowed himself a small smile. "Exactly," he agreed. "That's why I devised another plan." He breathed a little easier, confident that he had the master's ear.

From the corner of his eye he caught a movement near the entrance to the Source's chamber. He recognized Marax, and the smaller figure beside him. The Source gave a permissive nod, and Raynor gestured for Marax to send the girl in.

Her beauty once again struck Raynor. Although dressed in a simple, sleeveless tunic, she was a sight to behold. Dark curls danced about her head and came to rest on her shoulders. The girl's skin was pale and unblemished. A small, thin nose connected a red, pouting mouth with two large, green eyes. Her body was slim, with perky breasts and round, curvy hips.

"Master, may I present to you," Raynor said and gave a florid sweep with his arm, "Lilith."

At the mention of her name, the young woman curtsied. "Your wish," she said, "is my command." Her voice was melodic and light, like the tinkling of bells on a warm summer's day.

The Source circled her, studying her, judging her. She followed him with her eyes. Whereas even the most powerful demons cowered beneath his penetrating look, her expression held no fear. Instead, they looked unabashed and with open curiosity at the Source.

"Lilith, huh?" the Source mumbled. He threw his head back and a loud, boisterous laugh made the walls shake once again.

He wiggled a finger in Raynor's face. "Clever. Very clever. I see what you're up to," he chuckled. "She is a succubus, isn't she?"

Raynor nodded. "Yes, she is. Lilith was brought into being recently; she has not yet had the pleasure of the kill. I don't want her to kill. Not yet. What I suggest," he took a deep breath, "is for her to breed with a human. Her offspring will be what we need: a demon with human blood. A hybrid"

A destiny diverted

Ding. Dong. The church bell on Clay Street tolled nine times and the clear ring of the chimes danced across the wooden roofs of a sunlit San Francisco. It promised to be another warm and pleasant day in the long spring of 1884.

At the sound of the clock, Benjamin Turner picked up his pace. He clutched his briefcase in his right hand and his hat in the left. Tingtingting. A bell announced the departure of

the cable car from its stop at the corner of Clay and Kearny. Benjamin's newly shined shoes clacked on the pavement in a fast rhythm and the tails of his coat flapped after him. He sent up a silent prayer for the tram to wait a few more seconds. Today he would start his new job as a law clerk with Bainwright and Wood, Attorneys at Law, and he didn't want to be late.

He jogged around the corner onto Kearny Street where the cable car was slowly picking up speed. The woman appeared out of nowhere; he never saw her until it was too late. At full speed, he ran into her. The impact was so violent that Benjamin staggered back and only a few quick strides kept him upright. The woman was not so lucky. While he stood by and watched with horror, she fell on the pavement in a flurry of skirts and petticoats.

"Oh my goodness," Benjamin gulped. His face flushed with embarrassment and his chest tightened. "Are you all right, Miss?" He discarded his briefcase and hat onto the sidewalk and knelt beside her.

She tilted up her eyes to meet his and his heart stopped. Her eyes were the most amazing green he had ever seen. They spoke of confusion and surprise. Benjamin swallowed hard to get rid of the lump that clogged his throat.

"I am so sorry, Miss," he said when he found his voice again. It sounded hoarse and he had to swallow once more before he could continue. "It was my fault. I should have paid better attention."

"Indeed, you should have," she said. She smiled to take the sting out of her words. Her voice was like the music of a string quartet and her smile made his insides go liquid. "I am fine, however. If you could just help me up?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Benjamin stammered. His cheeks grew warm with shame for not offering his help sooner. He presented her his hand, took hold of her elbow and helped her climb back to her feet. Her fingers stayed on his wrist an instant longer than was strictly necessary and when she pulled back, his skin tingled where her hand had touched him. Benjamin's heart was thudding in his chest.

"Are you certain you're all right, Miss?" he asked. All thoughts of his job had fled from his mind and he was reluctant to let her go. "Perhaps I can take you somewhere? Maybe... maybe I can offer you a cup of coffee? It is the least I can do for frightening you so much."

She gave him another dazzling smile that caused butterflies to swirl in his stomach. "That would be very kind of you, Mr-?" She cocked her head.

"Turner," he said. "Benjamin Turner."

"Benjamin," she repeated, as if savoring the name on her tongue. He couldn't help but smile. He had never liked his first name - he preferred his middle name Coleridge - but when she pronounced his forename, it rolled from her lips like it was the most beautiful name she had ever heard.

She proffered him her hand and he lowered his head to press a chivalrous kiss onto her skin. "I am Li- Elizabeth," she said. "Elizabeth Adams."

It was years later that he discovered the full portent of the small pause before Elizabeth told him her name. As if she wasn't certain what it should be. And by the time he understood her hesitation, it was too late.

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"So that's the human you chose to sire our hybrid?" the Source asked. He turned away and after a wave of the Oracle's delicate hand her glass ball grew opaque. "He doesn't look very impressive."

"Ah, see, that's where you're wrong," Raynor said.

A sharp intake of breath from the Oracle reminded him who he was talking to and that he should pick his words more carefully. "Beg pardon," he added quickly. "It is a common mistake, however. In mortals, looks can be deceiving. I realize that this particular specimen, Benjamin Turner, does not appear very imposing. Still, I picked him for good reason. The man is smart and well educated. If left in peace, he would be destined for greatness."

"I see him become the twenty-seventh president of the United States, in 1908," the Oracle confirmed.

"However," Raynor continued as if she had not spoken, "he is also young and gullible. A beautiful woman like Lilith can easily seduce him. He is a lawyer, which means he has the potential for deviousness. His human genes combined with Lilith's demonic DNA will give you a half-breed who will grow into one of the strongest demons that ever existed." Raynor paused to add weight to his next words. "And raising him with us will insure his fierce loyalty to you, Master."

A child is born

It took six steps to cross the hallway. And six steps back. From the top of the stairs to the master bedroom, the distance measured a mere three paces. Funny, how he had never noticed that the second floorboard on the left side of the door creaked beneath his weight.

Outside, a late winter storm raged. The wind howled around the house and rain splattered against the windows. Benjamin had plenty of time to count and recount his steps as he paced back and forth across the landing. At irregular intervals, painful cries rose from the master bedroom. In that bedroom his wife, Elizabeth, was struggling to give birth to their first child. The family doctor, Dr. Jones, and Nurse Ipswich were assisting her. About two hours ago, the nurse banned Benjamin, husband and father-to-be, to the hallway. It was a miracle that the carpet wasn't threadbare yet.

Another scream rose from the room. Nurse Ipswich said something to reassure his wife; the soothing murmur of her voice drifted through the door. Benjamin could not make out the words. Every cry tore at him and his heart sat heavy in his chest. It was his fault; it was he that put Elizabeth in this position.

His thoughts wandered back to their wedding day, nine months ago to the day.

It had been late summer, warm but no longer hot. In her white silk dress Elizabeth looked even more beautiful than usual, although a thin veil hid her smooth features during the ceremony and exchange of vows.

A smile curled around Benjamin's lips when he recalled the kiss that sealed their promise. It had not been their first, of course. Over the four months of their courtship, kisses had been stolen, or freely offered when nobody was looking. But that moment in the church, in front of his family and friends, that was forever etched in his memory. That was when it was official. When he had made Elizabeth his wife. Something he had vowed he would do the day they met so violently on the corner of Clay and Kearny.

Their wedding night had been one of unbridled desire. Benjamin tried to be gentle and considerate; after all, his new wife would never have lain with a man before, and he did not want to hurt her. But in the face of the fierce passion she exhibited once she rested in his arms, he had quickly forgotten his good intentions. And he had taken her, fast and voraciously, again and again, until the first light of day found him exhausted and worn-out between the sheets.

"Waaah!"

Another shriek jolted him from the pleasant memories.

"Waaah!"

Benjamin frowned. That didn't sound like Elizabeth's pained cries. He strode to the door and folded his fingers around the knob. The stern nurse had been adamant about him waiting outside until she called for him. He couldn't just barge in. Could he?

Benjamin's dilemma was solved when the knob turned beneath his hand and the door opened. Nurse Ipswich stood before him, small beads of perspiration still glistening on her forehead. She looked at him oddly and for a moment his throat constricted in fear that she brought bad news.

Then she smiled. "Congratulations, Mr. Turner," she said. "It's a boy."

The nurse moved to the side and gestured for Benjamin to enter. Slowly, cautious and a little uncertain, he crossed the threshold. The sight on the bed was the most amazing he had ever seen. Draped among the fluffy pillows was his wife; her skin was pale and her beautiful dark hair was plastered about her temples. Still, despite her tired features, her green eyes glowed.

Something pricked behind his eyelids when she raised the bundle in her arms and he blinked rapidly. Small gurgles rose from the blanket. "Look, Benjamin," she said. "This is your son, Be-"

"No," Benjamin interrupted. "I want his name to be Cole. Not Benjamin."

Bright eyes blinked up from the tiniest human face he had ever seen. Mesmerized by the sight, Benjamin missed the flare of anger that for a brief second contorted his wife's face. The baby gurgled as if agreeing with his father and while he looked down upon the helpless child, Benjamin swore a silent oath that he would do anything to protect his son from harm.

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"How long before we can take the boy?" the Source asked. He tapped his fingers onto the armrest of the stone chair in his chamber.

"A while," Raynor cautioned. "We should be patient. This child is half-human, and humans don't mature as quickly as demons do. It is better if Belthazor stays in the mortal

world for a while. Besides, you wouldn't want the smell of dirty nappies permeating your chambers, do you?"

The Source stiffened and for a long second Raynor feared his joke had fallen badly.

"Hmm. I will hold you personally responsible for this boy," the Source grunted. "You will have Lilith bring him here as soon as possible. And you will train him."

"Of course." Raynor inclined his head. "That goes without saying."

The Source gave a dismissive flick of his hand and Raynor took his leave. On the threshold, the Source called him back.

"Raynor?"

"Yes, Master?" Raynor turned around.

"Have someone take care of that doctor and nurse. They saw Belthazor's true nature at the moment of his birth. We can't risk them blabbering about it to some witch."

"Consider it done."

* * *

The San Francisco police judged it an unlucky accident that both Dr. Jones and Nurse Ipswich met with an untimely death that very night, when Dr. Jones' carriage ran off the side of a cliff in the pouring rain.

The taking of Belthazor

"Congratulations, Turner!"

"Well done!"

Strange hands patted Benjamin's shoulders and slapped his back while Bainwright pumped his arm with enthusiasm. "Always knew you had it in you, Ben, to get us that extra seat in the Assembly. Glad to see you proved me right."

"Thank you, Mr. Bainwright." Benjamin grinned at the compliment from his boss and

party associate.

It was 1888; four years after he first met Elizabeth, and tonight was the final election night. Five minutes ago the polling results had been announced: the voters of District Nine in San Francisco had elected Benjamin Turner to be their representative in the California State Assembly.

Bainwright let go of Benjamin's hand and pressed his pince-nez tighter onto his nose. "Where's that pretty wife of yours?" he asked while scanning the room. "She deserves some of the credit, methinks."

"Yes sir, she does," Benjamin agreed. Having a beautiful, loving wife at their side had never hurt a politician yet. He chuckled. Politician. He guessed he really should start thinking about himself in such terms after today.

"Elizabeth was not feeling so well today," he continued. "She stayed home."

"Shame," Bainwright grumbled. "Tonight is your night of triumph. Anyway, wish her well for me. And tell her bravo for marrying such a promising young man."

"I will, sir," Benjamin nodded. Then the others in the room swept him away. It seemed that every single person present wanted to shake his hand, wish him good luck, and slap his back some more until he winced.

As soon as Benjamin saw his chance to leave without being noticed, he slipped from the room. Bainwright was right about one thing: today's victory should be shared with his wife.

Benjamin hurried through the streets, wanting to be home as soon as possible to tell her the good news. "Lizzie! Lizzie!" he shouted the moment he opened the front door. "I did it! We did it! We won."

The house was dark. Not a single lamp had been lit and the victorious smile faded from Benjamin's face. "Lizzie? Elizabeth?" Was she so ill that she had gone to bed early?

A small noise in the living room alerted him. He turned up the lamp and gasped at the sight of his son sitting in his playpen. The child's face lit up at the sight of his father. "Da?"

Benjamin reached into the pen and lifted his son. Two tiny arms wrapped themselves tight around his neck. "Da. Co' hun-gry."

"Where's mommy, Cole?" Benjamin murmured. He scanned the room.

A thump and a groan reached his ears. It came from upstairs. Fear struck his heart. What had happened to Lizzie? Had someone broken into the house and hurt her? A muscle jumped in his throat at the thought of some burglar laying his filthy hands on his wife.

Quickly, Benjamin set Cole back in the pen. The child uttered a mewl of protest and Benjamin ran a hand through his son's unruly curls. "Shh, my son. I'll be right back."

Taking three steps at a time, Benjamin ran up the stairs. Another moan came from the bedroom and his heart thudded in his chest with fear. Without thinking about the consequences, Benjamin threw open the door.

The sight that greeted him made his throat constrict and his heart stop.

Illuminated by the light of the stars outside the window, Elizabeth rested on her knees on top of the bed. Her lush, dark hair hung wild and unkempt about her face. Her green eyes appeared overlaid with a red glow. Her skirts were bunched around her hips and her bodice was lowered around her waist. Beneath her was a man. Benjamin had a fleeting impression of a mustached face contorted in pleasure. Or perhaps pain. Benjamin didn't wait to find out.

"No-" he croaked. His voice was the desolate voice of a man whose life just ended.

He whirled on his heels, raced back down the stairs and grabbed Cole from the living room before he stormed out of the door. He ignored Elizabeth's yell of dismay, her voice calling his name.

He ran through the dark streets. His feet pounded the pavement as fast as they could carry him. His son wailed in shock in his arms. Benjamin didn't pay attention to where he was going; he ran and ran. In his mind he kept seeing the tableau vivant in his bedroom, remembered that heart-stopping second when his world crumbled.

When Benjamin no longer had the breath to keep running, he found himself in a small park. Tears burned behind his eyes and he pulled his son close to his chest in search of comfort. How could Elizabeth do this to him? Didn't she know how much he loved her? Wasn't his love enough?

He sat down on a wooden bench and placed Cole on his knees. The boy's blue eyes gazed at his father's face from above teary cheeks. "Da?"

"It'll be fine, Cole. Everything'll be fine." Benjamin didn't believe a word he was saying.

"Benjamin." Elizabeth's voice startled him. It was cold, devoid of emotion and not at all the melodic timbre he remembered so well. "Give me the boy."

Benjamin jerked back to his feet, holding Cole tight. "No. You can have the house, the servants, the money. But you can't have Cole. I won't have my son grow up with-"

He never got to finish. She snatched the child from his arms.

"No!"

In the last few moments of his life, Benjamin Turner's world tilted upside down once more. The woman he had loved for four years, that he thought he knew so well, turned out to be someone else. Something else. Her eyes flashed blood red and despite his desire to protect his son, Benjamin took a step back. Blue fire streaked from her hands and hit him in the chest. A searing pain and then... nothing.

* * *

"Here," Elizabeth -Lilith- said. "You take care of him." She shoved a squirming Cole into Raynor's direction. "I've dealt with that brat long enough."

The boy opened his mouth and a loud wail escaped him. His face shifted and red patches showed across his skull. Small fists beat at the air.

"Hush, hush, little one," Raynor said. He took the boy from Lilith and put as much soothing noises into his voice as he could. "It's all right. You're home now. But you're too young to control your demonic form. So calm down."

Cole relaxed enough to stare at his new caretaker. He morphed back into the little blue-eyed, dark-haired son of Benjamin Turner. "Where Da?"

"Your dad is gone, Belthazor." Raynor glared over the boy's head at his mother. "This was not what we agreed on. The boy has barely formed any intellect. I had not planned on bringing him here for at least another year."

Lilith shrugged and her curls danced. "Sorry," she muttered although her tone held no regret.

Raynor sighed. He could not truly fault the succubus; she had suppressed her true nature for a long time. It shouldn't come as a surprise that she gave in to the strong pull of her

instincts. "Tell me that at least you got his soul?" he asked.

"I did," Lilith replied. She dug into a pocket of her wide skirts and pulled out a small globe. It glowed softly when she held it up high. "Although I can't imagine what use you could possibly have for that human's essence." She tossed the globe to Raynor before she shimmered away.

The boy's eyes followed the ball as it sailed through the air until Raynor deftly plucked it from its path. He reached for it. "Co' want," he demanded.

Raynor chuckled. "Not now, Belthazor. Maybe later."

Cole squinted angrily and began to cry again. "Want!" he repeated with all the force his young vocal cords could muster.

Heavy footsteps behind them made Raynor turn around. The Source entered the chamber and cocked his head to study the child in Raynor's arms.

"That's him?" The Source said, full of disdain. "That wrinkly, loud little human is going to be my most powerful servant?" He barked a humorless laugh. "Raynor, I think your ambition has proven bigger than your skills this time. Put him down and step aside so I can clean up your mess."

Raynor set the boy down but instead of backing away, he held up a hand. "Wait. It takes time. Training. Education. But this," he waved at the boy, "is Belthazor. And when I'm done with him, you will see and believe."

"Hmph," the Source grunted. However, he lowered his hand and, with a swirl of his black robes, strode from the room.

Raynor let out a breath and stuffed the glowing soul of Benjamin Turner into a pocket of his long robe. "Let's go, Belthazor, and find you some food."

The boy took Raynor's hand and trotted after him.

The Sweet Taste of Revenge

Raynor shimmered into his chambers in the Underworld. They were deserted, their gloomy interior lit by two flickering torches. In the light of the flames Raynor looked down at his hands and his face distorted in a grimace: his fingers were covered with dark stains. Blood. In the back of his throat he uttered a disgruntled noise. He hated a messy

kill. It had been an unwelcome twist of fate that the wife woke up when he was about to propel an energy ball at the wayward banker. The man should have stuck to the deal he made with the Brotherhood. Only a quick stab with the athame kept the woman from crying the alarm.

Someone rapped their knuckles on the wall beside the entrance to announce their presence. Raynor spun around. In the doorway stood a female demon; her skin was tinged green and tufts of yellow hair sprouted from the tips of her ears. She wore a shapeless black dress that was tied around her waist with a silver cord.

"Hello, Yalha," Raynor said in greeting when he discovered who his visitor was.

The woman's gaze fell on his hands and she smirked. "Losing your touch, Raynor?" she asked while she entered.

Raynor grunted. "Never. How's the boy? Has he been good?" He scanned his quarters in search of a cloth to wipe his hands.

Yalha gave a snort. "Unfortunately, yes. I wonder why you bother with that hybrid. He's never going to be any use to us. He's been here for, what? Four years? And still he can't invoke even a sizzle, let alone a lethal bolt. I say kill him and write it off as a failed experiment."

Raynor shook his head and gave up his search for a towel for the moment. "I told you that it takes time," he said. "The boy has the potential, believe me. Perhaps," he cocked an eyebrow at Yalha, "it is the teacher, not the student, that's at fault?"

A glimmer of fear flashed behind the demoness' red eyes and she flinched at the veiled threat. "I'll keep trying," she murmured.

Raynor nodded with satisfaction. "That's all I ask. Where is he now?"

"In the study hall. Practicing his energy balls. I'll send him over." Yalha made a beeline back to the entrance.

"No, don't," Raynor said. He finally found a rag and scrubbed the blood from his hands. "I'll go get him."

* * *

A few minutes later Raynor strode through the rough-hewn tunnels of the Underworld. Occasionally he passed underlings or messengers that scrambled among the shadows on

their way to fulfill their assignments. Upon Raynor's approach they scurried aside to make way but he paid them no mind.

It took several twists and turns before he reached the training caverns. Half a dozen large rooms had been set aside for younger demons to practice their powers. Although most of them were born with their abilities, it took careful honing of their skills before they had total control and could be sent out into the world.

When he approached the chambers, high voices reached him. Children's voices, taunting and mocking.

"Half-breed! Zap me if you can!"

"Wimp! Sissy!"

"Belthazor's a cry baby!"

Raynor clucked his tongue. Those damn kids were at it again; their favorite pastime was to ridicule young Belthazor with his human blood. And as long as the boy was incapable of defending himself, his fate was sealed. Demons preyed on weakness, and so far Belthazor had not shown much promise of becoming the powerful demon that Raynor was convinced he would be.

He reached the large vault that was used for fireball practice and peered into the dusk. The walls were blackened with the soot of countless energy bolts and lightning strikes and they seemed to swallow the light of the infrequent torches. It took a few moments before his eyes were used to the gloom and he could make out the scene before him.

Belthazor crouched in a corner; his back pressed against the wall. Three young demons, two boys and a girl, towered over him. Their expressions were contorted in evil grins and their eyes gleamed. Raynor recalled their names: Ralx, Zaltor and Naia. They were just a couple of months older than Belthazor but much more powerful. Belthazor's face was flushed a bright red.

For a second hope flared, then Raynor realized the redness was not caused by the boy's demonic form. It was the frustrated face of a human child who tried very hard to achieve something, and failed miserably.

Raynor gritted his teeth. As a toddler, Belthazor had morphed into his demonic body when he grew annoyed or angry but somehow that natural ability had been lost when the child grew older. One of these days the boy would have to relearn the skill and fend for himself. Or he was doomed to die a painful death.

"Hey!" Raynor yelled. The three demon children whirled around; their faces paled when they recognized him. Raynor dismissed them with a careless wave of his hand and they scurried away, their gaze not leaving him before they were safely out of the room.

Raynor knelt so he was at eye level with his charge. Fat tears shone in Belthazor's blue eyes and trickled down his cheeks. "I'm sorry," the boy muttered. He hung his head. "Mizz Yalha says I'm useless. But I try, I really do!"

"You're not useless," Raynor told him, his tone gentle. He reached out and tipped the child's head up with a finger beneath his chin. "One day you will be the most powerful demon the world has ever seen. All it takes is a little patience."

"I want it now," Belthazor said. "So they will leave me alone." Another angry tear spilled over and dripped down his cheek.

Raynor chortled inwardly. Patience wasn't the boy's strongest virtue.

"What did I tell you about tears?" he said. The gentleness left his voice and a sterner tone replaced it.

Belthazor wiped at his eyes with the back of a small fist. "Demons don't cry," he murmured.

"Exactly," Raynor said. "We plot revenge against those who wrong us. Remember that lesson."

Belthazor sniffled and nodded.

Raynor pushed himself back up. "The Triad has received a new shipload of souls that need to be condemned. Want to come and watch?"

The child's face lit up. "Can I? Oh, Raynor, please, can I?"

Raynor chuckled again. It would be a good education for the boy. And obviously he found it entertaining. "Sure you can," he said. He straightened and held out his arm until he felt a small hand folding into his. "Let's go. We don't want to be late, do we?"

* * *

Another year passed. And on the eve of Belthazor's eighth birthday, the boy still had not learned to control his powers; even the rodents that cluttered the underground tunnels were safe from him. Although the young demon managed to conjure the occasional tiny fireball, he had no conscious command over it, or any other demonic talent. Raynor was beginning to despair he ever would. The Source was growing increasingly impatient and it was getting harder and harder to keep the boy from being vanquished. Thus, Raynor had taken it upon himself to tutor the boy.

"Focus, Belthazor, focus!" he urged the child during another teaching session in his quarters.

The boy closed his eyes and grunted. He scrunched up his face in concentration.

"Now morph."

For long minutes nothing happened. Raynor sat back with a weary sigh. Suddenly, the boy's body shifted and he changed shape. At last Belthazor showed his full demonic splendor. He was baldheaded, several inches taller than in his human form, with pointed ears and the red and black coloring that marked him as one of high blood.

The child's lids blinked open and black eyes, round with surprise, stared at Raynor. "I did it?"

"You did it," Raynor grinned. "Congratulations." It was the first time that the boy had consciously changed into his other self. And it was a skill he was going to need if he were to be the soldier Raynor expected him to be. His demonic form would be so much stronger; the child's body already showed the signs of the well-muscled strength he would gain when fully grown. "Now, change back."

Another moment passed, and the human boy stood before Raynor.

"Do it again."

"Again."

"And again."

Rapidly, the boy morphed from his human body into his demonic form and back several times. Every time it took him less concentration and effort. Raynor knew that once acquired, it was an ability that would never be lost again.

"Very well," he said at last when the boy swayed on his feet with fatigue. "We'll try

shimmering tomorrow."

* * *

Raynor woke the next morning to an empty chamber. The small cot in the corner -Belthazor's bed- was deserted, the blankets crumpled in a heap on the floor. For a moment Raynor felt anger flare in his blood. Damn kid. He was supposed to practice shimmering today, not run away and play hooky.

He shrugged off the anger. The boy was young; by human standards he was still a child. Demons matured much faster. Raynor had known from the inception of his plan that it was a long-term commitment. One didn't create a mighty hybrid soldier in the short span of time it took to raise an ordinary demon.

A large, well-muscled demon entered his chamber. Raynor recognized him and was hard-pressed to conceal the cold shiver that ran down his spine. The demon was one of the Source's personal guards. His Praetorian watchers, the Source called them, displaying a nostalgic sentiment for the Roman era of his reign.

"He wants to see you," the guard grunted. "Now."

"Of course," Raynor said. He swung his legs from the bed and followed the guard while running down a list of possible issues in his mind. Why would the Source want to see him? All the schemes the Brotherhood had set in motion were being executed as he had envisioned.

He entered the Source's chambers. A vague, familiar scent hung in the air. Raynor paid it no mind; he was too surprised to discover Belthazor standing before the Source. What sort of trouble had the boy gotten into that the Source himself needed to deal with it?

"Belthazor?"

The boy's head whipped around at the mention of his name. Raynor could see the child was frightened but biting his lip not to cry. "I'm not sorry," he mumbled stubbornly and shook his head. Raynor frowned.

"See?" a female voice cried.

He spun in the direction of the sound. He recognized the woman; Darimia was a powerful she-demon and she stood in great favor with the Source. He couldn't make out the shapeless form that hunched at her feet.

"Told you that freak was bad news," she continued and pointed an angry finger at Belthazor. "He ruined my Ralx. Look at him!" She nudged with her toe at the figure that crouched in front of her. The pitiful creature moaned in pain and from the awkward way he held on to his shoulder Raynor knew he was missing an arm. He recognized the faint smell in the air: it was the reek of burnt demon flesh.

Raynor's eyes widened. Darimia's son Ralx showed great promise and accomplished his first human kill at the age of six. Belthazor couldn't have wounded him, could he? Unless-

"Zapped him in cold blood, the little devil. Nine years of my time wasted."

"Silence," the Source growled and Darimia snapped her mouth shut. He tapped his fingers on the armrest of his chair and stared at Belthazor. The young demon shifted uncomfortably beneath the heavy gaze. "Why?" the Source said at last, his question a command.

Belthazor shrugged. "He had it coming," he said with a defiant look in Darimia's direction. "He said I couldn't do it. I showed him wrong."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Raynor's heart swelled with pride. The boy's true nature was finally coming out! This was what he had worked for all these years. Of course it wasn't done: demons didn't take on each other while they were in the Underworld. It was one of the unspoken rules. Feuds were fought, grudges harbored, revenges plotted. But always the execution happened out in the world, not here.

The Source laid his head in his neck and howled. "Raynor," he gasped between bouts of laughter, "it looks like you have done a fine job with this half-breed after all. It took you long enough but I think I see the possibilities now."

"Yes, Master," Raynor said meekly. It was a struggle to keep the triumphant grin from his face and he lowered his head in a gesture of reverence. He winked at the boy from beneath his brow and Belthazor gave a shaky grin in return.

"Of course," the Source continued, "Darimia here will need to be duly compensated for her loss."

"Naturally," Raynor agreed. Ralx didn't possess the power of regeneration and a one-armed demon was useless. Darimia would lose her son. Fortunately, the Brotherhood was not lacking for funds. She could be bought off.

"That's settled then." The Source waved his long fingers and fire enveloped the

unfortunate Ralx until nothing but scorch marks were left. With another wave, he dismissed the other demons.

Belthazor looked up at Raynor as the older demon steered him from the room. "I did good, didn't I?"

Raynor smiled. "Oh yes, you did good. You did very good. Just don't do it again. At least not here."

Behind them the Source chuckled beneath his breath.

Baptism of Fire

"Witches," Raynor lectured in a low voice, "are our sworn enemies. They've hunted us since the beginning of time." He shrugged and pointed at the circle of women that knelt within a larger ring of burning candles. They were chanting softly. "If it were up to them," he continued, "we would all smother each other with love and live in peace forever after." He snorted with disdain, but softly, so as not to alert the coven absorbed in their ceremony. "There's not fortune to be made, no power to be gained from peace. Mark my words, Belthazor, peace is as useful to us as prayer is to an atheist."

Belthazor's blue eyes were glued to the scene before him. The air shimmered slightly over the heat of the candles. There was something alluring about the quiet chanting, the flickering flames, and the cold stars above.

So, these were witches? They looked like regular women; some were thin and wiry, others stout and big-bosomed. Every one of the nine witches was dressed in the tight bodices and long, dark skirts of their time. Most were young, barely at an age to get married. Only two of the women wore gray streaks in their hair. And none of them would stand taller than his shoulder, even in his human form. Belthazor was not impressed.

While mentor and student watched in silence from the thick underbrush, the witches' circle broke. The women embraced each other before separating. "Blessed be." The soft-spoken benediction reached Belthazor's ears on the gentle breeze that blew in from the Bay. "Blessed be, my sisters. Be careful on this special night."

A special night it was; New Year's Eve of 1899. In five minutes the clocks would strike midnight and a new century would begin. One witch would not live to see the wonders that the new era would bring.

In twos and threes the women scurried away along the dark paths of the park. Soon one witch was left; the coven's mistress. Belthazor watched while she busied herself to clear away the candles, blowing out the flames before placing them in a wicker basket that stood a few feet to the side. The edges of her long skirt brushed over the grass while she bustled about. She appeared to be in her mid-thirties, Belthazor thought. Her hair was long and colored a deep red that shone like copper in the starlight. Full breasts heaved beneath the close-fitting bodice and her skin was pale. To the teenaged hybrid, she was beautiful.

And she was the witch that Raynor had chosen to be his first true kill, his initiation to full demonhood.

Belthazor's heart thudded in his throat and his chest felt tight. Eager anticipation commingled with anxiety. What if he failed? What if he was unable to call upon the fireball when the moment was there? He pushed the doubts away and glanced sideways at Raynor, waiting for the signal. He had trained long years for this day. And Raynor had full confidence in him; he would not let his teacher down.

Raynor nodded once and drew further back into the shadows.

With a tiny mental prod Belthazor changed into his demonic form. Power surged through him and he took a grateful breath. The brush rustled as it settled around his new, bigger shape.

The witch spun on her heels, alerted by the sound. "Who's there?" she called. Her voice held a quiver while she squinted and tried to bore through the darkness into the dense undergrowth.

Belthazor hesitated for a second. He glanced over his shoulder but Raynor was nowhere to be seen. The demon knew, however, that his mentor would be watching his every move. If he failed-

He pushed the prickly branches of the evergreen aside and stepped out. When he walked into the moonlight, the witch's eyes widened and she gulped.

"Demon!" she gasped. Before Belthazor could react, she bounded towards her basket and pulled out a spray of lavender. She held the sprig before her while she intoned breathily:

*"Evil is approaching;
Let Darkness be withstood;
Blanket me with your defense;
Protect me with the power of Good."*

Pain slashed Belthazor's stomach and he grunted in surprise. He stopped to stare at the witch, black eyes cold.

*"Evil is approaching;
Let Darkness be withstood..."*

Again sharp pain shot through his body, like a thousand needles, and Belthazor doubled over. Anger flared in his blood and drowned out the pain. Damn witch!

He raised his hand and instantly a shining blue ball hovered over it. Her words hurt so much that he never thought to be relieved when the power answered his call. With a flick of his wrist, he flung the bolt at the witch.

The lavender wasn't protection enough against Belthazor's strength. The bolt hit her on the right hip and instantly she burst into flames. Fiery tongues licked at her skirts, her skin, and competed with her copper hair for brilliance. She screamed, once, then all was silent. The witch was gone. A few skimpy tendrils of smoke were all that remained.

Gulping deep breaths, Belthazor tried to gain control of the hatred that boiled his blood. He could still feel the pain of the witch's protection spell. Had the rest of her coven been present, he would not have hesitated in taking them on also. When he heard a noise, he wheeled around and conjured another ball.

Raynor walked from the shadows, slowly applauding his student. "Well done, Belthazor. You have studied well."

The bolt winked out. Anger faded; the hatred dulled to a rusty ache deep inside. A sense of accomplishment washed through Belthazor, pride at his mentor's praise. He grinned, revealing a row of small, pointed teeth.

"That was easy."

Like Mother Like Son

"Holy- Damn, Tarkin, what in all hells did you do that for?" Belthazor shouted. He jumped back barely in time before hot flames engulfed the young woman. The heat seared the hairs on his forearms. A fireball appeared in his right hand and he whirled around, prepared to attack his companion.

Tarkin threw his head back and laughed. He held up his hands, palms outward. "Easy,

Belthazor, easy."

Neither demon paid any attention to the woman who writhed and twisted to escape the flames, a silent scream on her lips. Belthazor glared at his friend; he didn't relinquish the ball just yet. "Well?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Tarkin laughed again. "Why?" he repeated with a shrug. "Because I can. Because it's fun. You should try it some time."

"Hmm," Belthazor grunted. The fireball disappeared and he returned to the bed, where blackened scorch marks was all that remained of the woman. "Raynor cautions against leaving signs of our presence," he muttered.

Tarkin snorted. "Raynor is an old bore. Who will care about a missing hussy? Once we have joined the Brotherhood, it'll be all work and no play. Enjoy it while you can, Belthazor. What do you say we find another wench to kill? We still have a few hours to spare."

Belthazor stared at the scorch marks. The girl had done him no harm and his human half, feeble and powerless as it was, murmured a protest.

"Sure," he said and flashed a toothy grin back at Tarkin. "Why not. But quickly. Raynor will have our hides if we're late for the ceremony."

* * *

Several hours earlier.

"Belthazor, my friend," Tarkin announced himself. He sauntered into the chambers that Belthazor shared with his tutor and sprawled onto a straight-backed chair.

Belthazor looked up from the ancient scroll he was deciphering.

"Are you still hiding your nose in those books? Man, you need to get out more." Tarkin gave a dismissive wave at the papyrus in Belthazor's hands. "Especially today!"

"I need to finish-" Belthazor began. Tarkin snatched the scrolls from the table.

"No, you don't. You need to have some fun."

Belthazor couldn't disagree. His eyes were hurting, from peering at the scribbled

writings all morning, and from the smoke that the torches gave off.

"Listen." Tarkin lowered his voice and dipped his head until it was close to Belthazor's. "Have you ever had the pleasure of a mortal woman? A human female? I know a place..." He let his voice trail off with hidden meaning and rolled his eyes.

Belthazor turned around in his seat to face his friend and he shook his head. "Can't say that I have."

He had no lack of female attention. Once he had gained control over his powers, killed his first witch and was obviously in the Source's good graces, demonesses began showing great interest in the handsome young demon. Belthazor had not returned any of their advances. He focused on learning, on gaining as much knowledge of the workings of magic as he could. Raynor was extremely pleased with his student.

And so was the Source. Pleased enough that he had invited Belthazor to join the Brotherhood of the Thorn. It was unprecedented for a demon of Belthazor's age to receive such an offer, and he had accepted with gratitude. The initiation ceremony was scheduled for tonight.

"Then you missed out on a good treat," Tarkin said. He clacked his tongue. "C'mon. I know the way. You can leave the books for tomorrow. Let's have some fun."

Belthazor hesitated. But Tarkin's rolling eyes and unspoken promises had piqued his curiosity. It would definitely be more entertaining than the chronicles of the Visigoths from the sixth century.

"Okay."

"All right!" Tarkin clapped his hands and long curls danced about his head. "Let's go then. Follow me." With those words, he shimmered from the chambers and there was nothing left for Belthazor to do but follow his trail.

* * *

They reappeared in a cluttered alley. Startled rodents scurried away through the debris. The alley was shaded and gloomy but at the far end the sun shone brightly onto a wide, sandy road. While Belthazor got his bearings and watched, a horse-drawn carriage sped by, followed on its wheels by a roaring automobile, the driver honking his horn to warn people to clear the way.

Tarkin preceded him out of the alley into the main street. The car left a dust cloud in its wake and it nearly obscured the tall buildings that loomed over them. Tarkin had brought them to New York. To downtown Manhattan, to be exact, and close to the docks. Belthazor sniffed the air; it smelled faintly of fish and seaweed.

Another car passed and Belthazor turned away to prevent the dust from getting in his eyes. He bumped into a gentleman dressed in a long, black coat with a high hat perched on top of his graying hair. A young woman with auburn curls and sparkling green eyes held his arm. She was half his age, Belthazor surmised, so she was probably the gentleman's daughter.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "Sir. Miss." Always be polite, Raynor taught him. 'You don't want to draw undue attention.'

While the gentleman merely inclined his head in acceptance of the apology and further ignored the well-dressed handsome young man, his daughter gave Belthazor a shy smile. He returned the smile with one of his own and was rewarded with a blush. She kept glancing back over her shoulder until her father steered her around a corner and they disappeared from view. Belthazor watched her go, his face tight.

Tarkin chuckled. "You obviously take after your parents."

Belthazor's head spun around and he blinked at Tarkin. His friend shrunk back from the fiery stare.

"I meant your mother," Tarkin said. "Lilith, the succubus? Seduction runs in your blood, my friend."

After a moment's pause, Belthazor's mouth quirked in a smile. "Guess you're right."

"Of course I'm right," Tarkin grinned. "Now, come on, I want to take you to that dance hall over there." He pointed to a two-story, red brick building on the opposite side of the street. A gaily-painted sign read 'Melody Ballroom'.

"After you, my friend." Tarkin gave a bow and an elaborate wave of his cape. They crossed the street, mindful of the carriages, horses and occasional motor car that moved steadily along the main road, and a few moments later Tarkin pushed against the door of the establishment.

It took several seconds before Belthazor's eyes grew accustomed to the dim interior of the dance hall. The place was quiet; few people had the time or the money to spend their

afternoons drinking and cavorting. The floor was empty of dancers. Three men sat at a bar, which could easily hold a dozen more. Their heads swiveled around at the newcomers, and dismissed them after a glance.

Not so the four or five women in the hall. Their eyes lit up at the sight of new customers. It didn't hurt that the two young men were good-looking and dressed well. Amid a flurry of smoothing skirts, pushing back strands of hair, straightening shoulders and taking deep breaths so that their bosoms filled out, the women, every single one of them young and pretty, rushed to meet them.

Employees of the hall, Belthazor immediately understood. The women would dance with the male customers, keep them company, laugh at their jokes. And perhaps more. Although he did not have much firsthand experience, the demon was well read, and well educated in the ways of the world. He cast a sidelong glance at Tarkin who gave a barely perceptible shrug. Oh well, a mortal woman was a mortal woman. And they didn't have time to go court a female; the Source expected them at midnight.

Belthazor looked down at the women who were shuffling in front of him, each trying to catch his eye while pushing aside the others. It was so funny that he would have laughed aloud, except it would ruin the 'man of the world'-image he was trying to project. Finally his gaze settled on one of the eager quartet, a woman of maybe twenty-one, with dark, curly tresses framing a pale, freckled face. Her eyes were a deep brown, and Belthazor thought she was pretty enough. Her waist was thin, her breasts high and firm and her smile reached her eyes. Yes, she would do quite well.

He pushed the other females aside, ignoring their pouts, and bowed at the dark-haired woman while reaching for her hand to place a gentle kiss on its palm. "Hello Miss," he said with a smile. "May I buy you a drink?" Behind him, Tarkin made a soft noise that could have been stifled laughter.

Her eyes widened at the polite question and she smiled at him coyly, dimples appearing in her cheeks. "Oh yes, Sir, you may," she breathed. Belthazor was quite certain that her breathiness was an act.

With a firm hand on her elbow, he guided her past the bar, toward a dark booth in the back of the establishment. A flickering candle in the middle of the table provided a circle of light. The girl slipped into the booth, and Belthazor followed. Tarkin, his arm around the waist of a petite blonde, took a seat at her other side and she gave him a dark look before turning her smile back to Belthazor.

The demon was quite enjoying himself; this was so much more fun than studying. Even though he knew the girls would be prepared to do whatever he or Tarkin would desire

-provided they paid them enough coin- Belthazor was convinced he could persuade the girl at his side to forgo her usual fee. As Tarkin had so aptly remarked, seduction was in his blood.

The barman, clued in to the girls' tastes, appeared at their table with two fluted glasses of bubbly liquid. Champagne. Belthazor blinked. Give a girl an inch, and she'd take a mile. Then again, the girls probably received a small percentage for the drinks they commissioned.

"Gentlemen? What'll it be?"

"I'll have a beer," Tarkin said.

"Brandy," Belthazor ordered, repeating something he had overheard one time or other. He watched the man bustle away.

"So," the demon said, turning back to the girl as the bartender returned with their order a moment later. He took her hand between his and let his thumb trail idle patterns on her palm. His blue eyes held her gaze and her lips parted a little in response. She licked her lips with the tip of a pink tongue. "What's a pretty girl like you doing in a place like this?"

This time, Tarkin failed to smother the laughter and he hid his face in his beer. The blonde in his lap giggled.

The girl beside Belthazor looked stunned. "Ohh," she said softly, her eyes never leaving his face. "You made that sound like you mean it."

Belthazor raised an eyebrow. "And why wouldn't I?"

She scanned his face, as if trying to read his deeper thoughts. It was obvious from the look on her pretty features that she was uncertain what to think. Did he mean the kind words? Or was her new escort pulling her leg? Belthazor chortled inwardly as he saw the questions flash across her face.

"What is your name, Miss?" he asked with a gentle smile. "Mine is-" He hesitated. Raynor's voice sounded in his head. 'Always be careful about unveiling your identity, Belthazor.'

"Cole," he said, grasping at a barely recollected memory. "Cole Turner." A good thing the girl's eyes were fixed on his features, or she would have noted the look of surprise on Tarkin's face. "And this is my friend."

"Tarkin," Tarkin said, leaning forward to feast his eyes on her cleavage. "So nice to meet you."

The blonde pushed him back and nestled her head against Tarkin's shoulder. "I'm Susy," she quipped.

"Emily," the dark-haired girl introduced herself.

* * *

It was three beers and two brandies later that Belthazor got to his feet and held out his hand to Emily. He honestly liked her. Although she was a working girl, she was intelligent and possessed a quick wit that he found quite refreshing after the murky politics of the Underworld. It wasn't by choice that she worked in the Melody Ballroom; she was trying to save up enough money so she could buy herself and her little brother passage west.

She smiled a promise at him as she accepted his hand so he could help her get up from the bench. "I have a room upstairs," she whispered in his ear.

"Then let's not wait any longer," Belthazor whispered back just as softly. She giggled. Belthazor couldn't remember how many glasses of bubbly liquid the barman brought her, but it was obviously more than she was used to. He leaned down to kiss her deeply.

She studied him for a few seconds, a little breathless from his kiss. Again, he found her thoughts easy to read. He made her uncertain; he was so different from other patrons. A part of her wanted to believe the illusion, his seduction of her.

She led him up a narrow flight of stairs and into a small room with burgundy curtains that shut out the light. A neatly made bed stood in the middle of the floor. To the side was a nightstand with a water pitcher and a bowl.

Emily closed the door behind them. For a long moment, Belthazor just stood there. Despite the bravado, he was suddenly unsure what to do next. He didn't like the feeling; it reminded him of his spineless human half.

"You have never done this before, have you?" Emily asked. She chortled. "That's okay, I'll help you." She reached for the buckle that kept his belt closed.

Belthazor proved an eager student, as always. It didn't take him long before he caught on to the rhythm. When his lust was satisfied, he let out a groan of contentment and

slumped across Emily's naked body.

A kick against his ankle pulled him from the pleasant buzz. "Belthazor, get up," Tarkin commanded, kicking him again.

"What-" Belthazor mumbled, pushing himself up and away from the girl. Then he realized that Tarkin had called him by his true name and angrily he whirled around. Something blue streaked past him, singeing the hair on his arms, and Emily exploded into orange fire.

His human half filled with pity at the sight, while his demonic blood bubbled with pleasure at the flames, the evidence of their power.

"What in hell did you do that for?"

Ties of Blood

Raynor paced the length of his chambers, taking large, angry strides. He struggled to keep his temper under control and only the many years of experience prevented him from flinging fireballs at the scrolls on the table.

Where the hell was Belthazor?

The boy -Raynor expected he should stop calling him 'boy' after tonight, yet in his mind his protégé would be a boy for a long time still- should have been here, studying and preparing for the initiation ceremony at midnight. Instead, when Raynor arrived, the chambers were empty, the scrolls deserted in an untidy heap on the table, and Belthazor nowhere to be found.

He had tried casting about, figuring the boy would show up on his mental radar. But he found nothing. And that could only mean one thing: Belthazor was not underground, he had gone up to the world.

"Damn that half-breed," Raynor muttered under his breath as he made yet another turn on his heels. Didn't the boy know what an honor he had been granted? It was rare for the Source to invite new demons into the Brotherhood. Only the best of the best were given that privilege. And here Belthazor was chosen at the wee age of eighteen. It was exceptional.

Footsteps in the hallway caught his attention and he squared his shoulders, ready to give

Belthazor a piece of his mind. But the angry phrases fled from his memory when Raynor saw who his visitor was.

Accompanied by a single guard, the Source entered the chamber.

"Ah," he rumbled in his deep voice after looking around. "Young Belthazor is gone."

"Belthazor will be ready in time," Raynor assured him quickly. Silently, he cursed the boy for disappearing without a word.

"Of course he will," the Source said with a dismissive wave of his hand as if there was no doubt about Belthazor's presence at the ceremony. And perhaps there wasn't. Nobody ever turned down the Source's invitation to join the Brotherhood of the Thorn. "I wanted to have a word with you. In private."

Raynor bowed his head and indicated a chair, inviting the Source to sit down. The guard took up station near the entrance to make sure nobody could walk in unannounced.

"How can I be of service?" Raynor asked once they were seated.

"You have always been one of my more trustworthy servants," the Source said. "You kept your promise; you turned Belthazor into a powerful soldier. He will still need our guidance, of course. He is young. And half-human."

Raynor nodded, wondering if the Source was having second thoughts about inviting Belthazor to join the Brotherhood. "He is. He's also smart, strong, and loyal. He'll serve you well."

The Source didn't reply right away. His long fingers tapped a rhythm on the table's surface while he seemed to ponder Raynor's words. "I want to make sure he does. You still have his father's soul?"

Raynor's eyes widened. "Yes. Belthazor has been fascinated with that soul since he came to us. I promised to give it to him tonight. As a sort of... graduation present."

The Source chortled. "I like that. Graduation present." He turned his head, face hidden in the shadows of his hood. Raynor couldn't help the shiver that ran along his spine when the full might of the Source's gaze touched him. "You'll give me the soul," the Source said. "If Belthazor is that interested, it'll be an added guarantee of his loyalty."

Raynor hesitated but one second. Belthazor was not going to like this. Raynor hadn't said a word too many: ever since he was a little boy, the glowing orb that held his father's

soul had fascinated the young demon. Raynor had no clue why. It was not as if the boy could put the thing to any use. Perhaps it had sentimental value. Perhaps it was merely a desire to hold on to a childhood memory, the way everyone, mortals and demons alike, tended to hold on to something from their earliest youth. Raynor himself still owned the gemstone bracelet that had belonged to the quarry of his freshman kill.

He got to his feet and walked over to a row of planks attached to the far wall. A small chest sat on top of the highest shelf. He took down the box, opened the lid and a bluish light shone up. Raynor reached in and drew out the orb. He held it in the palm of his hand for a moment, admiring the soft glow, before turning around and offering the ball to the Source.

Long fingers curled around the ball, whisking it from Raynor's hand, and with a quick gesture, Benjamin Turner's soul disappeared somewhere within the Source's long robes.

"What should I tell the boy?" Raynor asked. "He'll want to know what I did with it."

"Tell him the truth," the Source said. "Let him know he can have it in due time."

* * *

The Source's footfalls had hardly died down in the dark tunnels or Belthazor shimmered into the chambers, followed on his heels by Tarkin. Belthazor was laughing; a grin split his face, and Tarkin's smirk was at least as wide as Belthazor's when he clapped his friend on the back.

"Did you see her face?" Tarkin guffawed. "Did you? That utter look of surprise?"

"Yeah, I saw it. It was priceless."

Then Belthazor noticed Raynor watching them from the shadows. His mentor's face was dark, his expression stern, and his cold stare froze the grin on Belthazor's face.

"So good of you to come back," Raynor remarked.

"I was--We were--" Belthazor stammered. Forgotten was the joy of seduction, the pleasure of the chase. The last thing he had wanted to do was anger his teacher.

"You should've seen ol' Belthazor here," Tarkin divulged. "Like flies to honey. He's a real lothario, our Belthazor is." He hid a giggle behind his hand.

Belthazor poked Tarkin in the ribs to shut him up.

Raynor's eyes flicked from Belthazor to Tarkin and back. "Have you two been drinking?" he asked, his voice dangerously calm. "Today, of all days?"

"Only a little," Belthazor murmured. Two brandies at the first bar. A bottle of fine wine at the second. After that, his memory got fuzzy.

"An itty-bitty little," Tarkin echoed, holding his thumb and finger an inch apart.

Without warning, Raynor's arm shot out and a flat-handed blow caught Belthazor on the left cheek. The slap echoed through the room and his head still swam when a shocked squeal from Tarkin told Belthazor that his companion got his ears boxed also.

It was enough to sober him, if not to disperse the alcohol from his blood.

"You!" Raynor said, jabbing a finger at Tarkin. The younger demon cupped his cheek in his hand and his eyes blazed with indignant fury. "Go to your own quarters. Fill a bucket with cold water and dip your head in until you are sober again. Then get dressed for the initiation ceremony."

Tarkin opened his mouth to protest, then thought better of it -he wasn't that drunk, apparently- and shimmered from the room.

Raynor turned back at Belthazor. "Are you in need of a bucket too?" he asked.

Belthazor shook his head and regretted the gesture immediately. "No. I'm fine. I'll be fine. I'm sorry."

"Never say you're sorry," Raynor said. "Did you leave any tracks? Witnesses?"

"No."

"Did you shimmer in and out where nobody could see you?"

"Yes. We're not stupid. We used a back alley."

"Hmm." Silence reigned while Raynor studied Belthazor until the young demon shifted uncomfortably beneath the scrutiny.

"Lothario, huh?" Raynor said at last, his voice gentler. "You better get ready. Your robe is

waiting for you in the other room."

* * *

It was less than an hour later that Belthazor waited outside the High Council's chambers to be called in. Waiting with him was Tarkin and another demon, a female. Her name was Jodhra and Belthazor didn't know much more about her than her name. She had to be good at what she did, though, or she wouldn't be here. He glanced sideways at his friend. Tarkin had sobered up since they returned underground from their excursion. Perhaps he had followed Raynor's advice and taken a cold bath. Or perhaps the seriousness of what was about to happen had been enough to dissipate the alcohol in the demon's system. In any case, Tarkin's face was tight. Belthazor suspected he wore the same expression. His stomach was a hard stone in the pit of his belly. Both demons were well aware that today was a very important -if not the most crucial- day of their demonic careers.

To be offered a membership to the Brotherhood of the Thorn was not an honor given lightly. Although Raynor headed the Brotherhood, it was the Source himself who decided who would be asked. The Brotherhood demanded utter loyalty, strength, and cunning from its members. In return, the Brothers could depend on and trust one another - as far as trust was possible among demons. A blood oath confirmed the relationship and forged a bond stronger than any vow.

Belthazor knew all this; Raynor had explained it to him countless times. He could reiterate the words of the pledge in his sleep. Still, knowing was a far cry from actually going into that room and take the oath in front of the mightiest of the mighty. He straightened the hood around his head and changed into his demonic form.

A bald-headed demon appeared in the doorway to the High Council hall. With a sharp nod of the head, he motioned for Belthazor and the other two to enter the chamber. Without a pause, the three initiates filed in.

Although their faces were hidden deep within the cowl of their robes and their heads were down respectfully, Belthazor couldn't suppress his curiosity and he peeked around from beneath the edge of his hood. The High Council chambers were not a place one visited often. Nor did anyone desire to - unless one was a member of the Council. This was where treason was discussed, judgments were passed, and verdicts were called and often executed.

On a raised platform to the left Belthazor recognized the robed silhouettes of the Triad,

their black, soulless eyes cold and unreadable. On the right, on an even higher dais, sat the Source himself, face invisible, long hands folded across his chest. The three demons bowed their heads even deeper in greeting of their superiors.

A fire roared deep within a pit in the middle of the floor. Belthazor swallowed and despite the heat that rose from the round hole, he shivered. Traitors were cast into that pit when they were found guilty. He had been present once, when a warlock was condemned for killing a demon. If he closed his eyes, he imagined he could still hear the man's screams drifting up from far below.

The three initiates circled the pit and halted in front of an altar carved from a thick block of basalt. On its top stood a blackened chalice. An athame lay beside the chalice, its blade gleaming sharply in the light of the flickering torches. A dark priest, tall and straight-backed, stood at the altar. He was chanting, in a language so ancient that Belthazor couldn't recognize it despite his long years of studying demon history.

Behind the dignitary sat thirteen demons, the highest ranking among the Brotherhood. Raynor sat in their midst. Belthazor tried to catch his mentor's gaze, hoping perhaps for some encouragement. But Raynor's eyes were distant and slipped over him almost as if he didn't recognize his charge.

At a small gesture from the Source, the dark priest raised his hands and picked up the ancient chant in a louder voice. While Belthazor and the others watched, the chalice began to glow, emitting a dark glare that seemed to swallow the light until the torches flickered wildly and Belthazor had to squint to make out anyone or anything beyond arm's reach. The temperature in the room dropped, and the cold nipped at his skin through the thick robe. Goosebumps sprang up on his arms. Goosebumps of cold as well as fear. Ancient forces, more powerful than any he could imagine, gathered in the room. For the first time in his young life, the demon truly realized that he was part of something major, a force to be reckoned with. He couldn't help but rejoice at the thought.

His thoughts quickly melted away when Raynor approached the altar. The tall priest turned toward Belthazor's mentor and placed the athame in Raynor's hands. Intoning an ancient charm, Raynor reached out to Belthazor. They had discussed this part of the ceremony and Belthazor knew what was expected from him. He took a step forward, pulled up the sleeve of his left arm and held out his hand.

The blade was sharp as the athame sliced through his skin. Dark ruby drops of blood welled while his mentor cut his own palm to mirror Belthazor's wound. The priest took their wrists and held both their hands over the chalice. They watched the blood drip into its black nothingness.

"Tan ak la ak;
Hakra tal dralnic," Raynor recited.

"Tan ak la ak," Belthazor repeated. He translated the words in his mind as he spoke.

"My blood, your blood;
Brothers for eternity;
My life in your hands;
Your life in mine;
Together we serve the Source of bane."

They said the oath three times and the priest let go of their hands. Belthazor lowered the cowl of his robe and exposed his face so all present could see and recognize the new associate to the Brotherhood. He stepped back to take his place among the three initiates.

Another of the thirteen Brotherhood demons took Raynor's place. Tarkin's mentor, and Tarkin joined him at the altar. The ceremony was repeated until Tarkin also folded back his hood and stepped away. Then it was the turn of the third demon.

As Jodhra smoothed her cloak and returned to the edge of the pit, the priest raised his hands high, his voice growing louder and louder until it reverberated through the chamber. There was a flash of light, and a cloud of yellow vapor billowed from the chalice. Belthazor held his breath until most of the smoke had drifted away.

The Source rose to his feet and everyone turned their attention toward him.

"The Brotherhood of the Thorn is one of the most venerable fellowships I know," he said solemnly. "Ancient beyond memory, the Brotherhood has existed since before time began, and will prevail when time has ended. Serve it well, and the rewards will be plenteous."

With that, the official part was over, and the Triad and the Source withdrew. The thirteen Brotherhood demons congratulated their new brethren. "Welcome, Brother," they said, locking hands with the three members. "Welcome." Belthazor kept grinning happily, and he wasn't surprised to see his grin reflected on Tarkin's face.

"We did it, Brother," Tarkin said, reaching up to clasp Belthazor's shoulder. "We did it."

Belthazor bared his trademark row of pointed teeth.

* * *

"Follow me," Raynor said with a faint quirk of his mouth. "I have something for you."

Belthazor lifted an eyebrow, then remembered. His father's soul. Raynor promised he would give him the glowing orb once he was accepted as a full-blooded demon into the Brotherhood. How could he have forgotten!

He followed Raynor from the High Council chambers, shifting back into his human form as he walked. His demonic body was much more powerful but it took a lot of energy to maintain that strength. And it had been a long day. Belthazor was tired.

His step faltered when Raynor took a left turn. Their chambers were off to the right. Belthazor hurried to catch up. "Where are we going?" he asked.

Raynor merely smiled and walked on. A few more twists and turns in the dark tunnels of the underground and, "Here we are," he said. He gestured at a doorway that led to a small and sparsely decorated room. "Your new home."

"My what?" Belthazor asked. "Why?"

"Now that you're a full Brother, I felt you needed quarters of your own," Raynor said. He chortled. "Especially after that jaunt into the world today. You can't live with your old mentor forever, you know. I have taught you all I can. It's time you start carving your own niche."

"Oh." Belthazor didn't know what else to say. Raynor's chambers were the only home he had ever known, or at least the only home he remembered.

"You will, of course, be free to decorate it in compliance with your own taste," Raynor said. "But that'll have to wait. I have an assignment for you which will require that you find living accommodations in the human world for a while."

"Oh," Belthazor said again. "An assignment? Already?"

"Yes. What did you think? That you could dawdle your way to the top of the Brotherhood?" The faint smile on Raynor's features indicated it was a joke. He waved a hand across Belthazor's eyes for a moment, then pointed at the table. "You know what to do. All the information you need is in there." Belthazor followed the outstretched finger and noticed a paper folder on the table's surface. "I don't want to see you here again until you are successful. Don't let us down, Brother."

"I won't," Belthazor promised. "I won't."

Raynor turned to walk away.

"Wait," Belthazor said. "What about my father's soul? You said you would give it to me tonight."

"Ah," Raynor said. His face took on a pained expression. "There's been a slight change of plans."

"What?" Belthazor exclaimed. He felt anger stir deep within. He had wanted that soul all his life, waited patiently for it; it was the single thing that connected him with his past. "What do you mean? It is mine!"

"Now, no need to get all upset," Raynor hushed. "The Source has it. He wanted it. Besides, you should know better than to put all your trust in a demon's promise. Even mine."

"What does the Source want with my father's soul?" Belthazor demanded.

Raynor shrugged. "Insurance," he said. "He has not forgotten your ancestry. He is worried that you might give in to weak human emotions, like compassion and pity. As long as he holds your father's soul, he'll believe in your loyalty. He said he'd return it to you, once you have proven yourself to him."

"When will that be?" Belthazor wanted to know. "I joined the Brotherhood of the Thorn today! I killed witches for you, for him. What more does he want?"

Raynor gave another shrug. "It's not my place to question the Source's motives. And if you cherish your hide, neither will you. You'll just have to be patient a little while longer. Now, go study that file and do your job. Everything else will follow."

Belthazor gritted his teeth as he watched his former mentor walk away. Infuriating as it might be, Raynor was right. If the Source had Benjamin Turner's soul, there was nothing he could do but wait until he decided Belthazor was ready to receive it. Fuming inwardly, Belthazor turned and entered his new chamber. He grabbed the file and began to study it.

Soul Assignment

Weeks, months, decades strung together until a hundred years passed. History raced forward at a breakneck speed. Belthazor's first centennial, also the last century of the second millennium, witnessed some of mankind's greatest achievements as well as its worst atrocities. It was the bloodiest century in the annals of man, and the creatures of the Underworld never idled.

In 1911, the unsinkable Titanic went down and took 1,513 of its passengers to a cold, wet grave.

On June 28, 1914, the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo led to World War I. 8.5 Million soldiers died before peace came in 1918.

In 1922, Howard Carter discovered the tomb of Tutankhamen in Egypt.

On February 17, 1924, a fire broke out in a San Francisco speakeasy. When the flames died down, one woman was found dead. The cause of death was determined to be strangulation. Her name was P. Russell.

In 1925 and later in '27 and July '28, the remains of young women were found in cities all over the United States. The victims were incinerated by means unknown, and burned beyond recognition. Nobody had the means to connect these murders to one perpetrator. The murderer has never been found.

In 1933, Adolf Hitler established the Third Reich in Germany while in the United States Franklin Delano Roosevelt accepted the office of President.

Vivien Leigh played Scarlet O'Hara opposite Clark Gable in 1939's 'Gone with the Wind'.

On August 6, 1945, the 'Enola Gay' dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan.

In 1948, a creature described as a fiery red giant slaughtered an entire village in Eastern Africa. Authorities called the tale a myth and the slaughter a matter of intertribal warfare. The case was quickly closed.

In 1955, American audiences watched 'Gunsmoke' and 'I Love Lucy' on television.

Yury Alekseyevich Gagarin became the world's first astronaut in 1961.

On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King had a dream in Washington, DC, and on July 27, 1968, Julian Dana William McMahon was born in Sydney, Australia.

In 1969, Neil Alden Armstrong took that one small step for man onto the moon.

In 1972, two spinster sisters were brutally stabbed in their family home in Nantucket. Nothing was taken from the premises, except for a golden pendant, an heirloom that dated back to the 16th century. The murderer is still at large.

IBM introduced its personal computer in 1981; in 1983 Microsoft launched the Windows operating system, an event that would give rise to bouts of technology related anger until deep into the 21st century.

Television audiences in 1985 were watching the 'Cosby Show' and 'Cheers'.

In 1988, Belthazor, assuming his alias Cole Turner, enrolled into Harvard Law School. He graduated several years later with flying colors. None of his fellow students thought him anything but a dedicated scholar intent upon a career in law.

The Berlin Wall, keeping East Germans captive for nearly 30 years, fell in 1989.

In 1998 and 1999, people nervously prepared for the approaching turn of the millennium. Imminent computer failures were believed to lead to communications breakdowns, chaos, and the final apocalypse. It was the day before Christmas, when Belthazor returned to the Underworld after a mission well done.

CHRISTMAS EVE 1999, UNDERWORLD

"Plea bargains are deserving of serious respect and consideration by the court," Belthazor murmured, reading out loud. He lounged in his human form on an easy chair, its leather old and cracked, a heavy book in his hands. Numerous candles and torches illuminated his chambers, chasing off the dark shadows of the Underworld and casting a bright glow. "The sentencing judge should not reject a joint submission without first--" he turned the page and continued, "--advising counsel of his or her concerns and giving counsel an opportunity to explain the foundation for their position."

"Excuse me?"

Belthazor looked up at the unexpected voice. Tarkin strolled into the chamber and took a seat on the chair at the desk.

"What's that tedious drivel you're reading?" He leaned forward to catch the title of the tome in Belthazor's hands. It was printed in bold, white lettering upon the spine.

"Crimes and Punishment: Cases, Materials, and Readings in Criminal Law'... Sounds terribly interesting – not."

Tarkin turned to the desk to study the books piled high upon its surface. "'The Winning Brief: 100 Tips for Persuasive Briefing in Trial and Appellate Court'. Nice." He feigned enthusiasm. "Oh, and I see you got 'Philosophy and the Criminal Law: Principle and Critique' too! That's a real page-turner, isn't it? Belthazor, what's gotten into you? You're barely ever here, and when you are, you stuff your nose in these books. Please don't tell me your human half is growing a conscience after all these years?"

Belthazor sighed and shut the book in his hands. "No, Tarkin, it's not. I need to brush up on these matters for my deep cover to be effective. If I don't have a clue as to what I'm doing, I'll blow it before I even get the chance to put it to good use."

"Ah, yes, I heard. You're San Francisco's newest Assistant District Attorney. Congratulations, my Brother. Why don't you come with me and we can celebrate your successes in the world of men? I happen to know this club where we can meet some nice ladies. C'mon, what do you say? You need to go out more!"

Belthazor chuckled at the cocky grin his friend offered him. "You never stop, do you?" he asked. "Don't you grow weary of that game?"

"Weary? Never!" Tarkin tilted his head and contemplated Belthazor's words. "Are you saying you are bored, Brother?"

Belthazor shrugged. "A little," he admitted. He leaned forward to pick up another book from the desk. "True romance went out of style with women's lib in the sixties. The art of seduction is not as much fun as it used to be. And my work for the Brotherhood? It's making me damn tired, how it never lets up. It's damn simple, too. Witches these days are so clueless, it poses no challenge whatsoever to take them out. And down here, the politics never change; everyone is always scheming for more power, attempting to get into the upper levels' good graces, trying to stab each other in the back at every corner. Yes, Brother, you could say I'm bored with this life. I find it dull and dreary."

"So you read law books." Tarkin frowned. "You just got back from an assignment yesterday, didn't you?" he said. "Get the witch?"

Belthazor nodded. "Of course. One little energy ball, and she was history. Easy as pie."

"Well, that was exciting, wasn't it?" Tarkin asked. "To have all that power run through your veins, the thrill of the kill, the final scream, the scent of burned flesh?"

Belthazor shook his head. "Nah. Shimmer in, hit 'em with a bolt, shimmer out, job done. Where's the challenge, the glory?"

Tarkin opened his mouth to protest when another demon appeared in the door opening and forestalled any further conversation.

"Vornac!" Belthazor greeted the newcomer. "What brings you here? I thought you were still in southern China?"

"Got called back yesterday," Vornac said. He turned to Tarkin and stated quickly, "Please, Brother, I need to speak with Belthazor alone."

"But--" Tarkin began. Vornac gave him a glare, and Tarkin got the message. "Sure," he sighed. He looked at Belthazor, catching the demon's eye. "Think about what I said. The offer's always good."

"Thanks." Belthazor gave a half-smile while Tarkin disappeared in a shimmer of air. He turned back to Vornac.

"What can I do for you? The witch in Chicago is taken care of, I finished that job yesterday."

"I know," Vornac said, sitting himself down upon the chair that Tarkin vacated. "That's not why I'm here. I have another task for you."

"What?" Belthazor exclaimed. "Oh no, I just got back. You can't send me out again so soon. I've been working non-stop since 1983. You promised me a break. I deserve a break! And I need to prepare for this long-term cover. Ask Tarkin to do it. He's growing restless, he could use a good kill."

Vornac sighed. "I apologize. I know we've been working you hard. And you've proven yourself a worthy member of the Brotherhood. I wouldn't ask, except--This one comes straight from the top."

"The Source?" Belthazor asked, incredulous. It had been years since he heard from the Source. The last time was in -he wracked his brain for a moment- 1964, when he had demanded that the ruler finally hand over his father's soul -- and nearly found himself beheaded for his insolence. Afterwards, Raynor or his right-hand man Vornac took care of briefing and debriefing Belthazor.

Vornac gave a curt nod. "Yes. He specifically asked for you. He says you're the best assassin to do the job."

Belthazor's shoulders slumped. It was impossible to ignore orders coming directly from the Source. He put the legal volumes back on the desk and leaned forward. "So, what do I have to do?"

Vornac pulled a manila folder from his robes. "It's all in here. You need to take out a coven in Oakland. Four witches in all. And it needs to be done fast. They have to be dealt with before the turn of the millennium. This is an important job, Belthazor. Do it well, and I'm sure the Source will reward you generously."

"Will he give me my father's soul?" Belthazor asked.

Vornac gave a shrug. "I don't know. You'll have to ask him when you're finished."

Belthazor accepted the file and opened it. Several resumes of men and women were folded inside, each with a photo stapled onto the page. He pulled out the first sheaf of paper and began to read.

NEW YEAR'S EVE 1999, OAKLAND

"Let me fix that for you," Emma said. She reached up to straighten the bow tie around her fiancé's neck. "There, that's better." She took a step back to admire him.

The black of the rented tuxedo contrasted starkly with the searing white of the shirt. With his well-toned body, complemented by a chiseled face, Andrew made a dashing figure in the formal wear. Yes, he was definitely the handsomest man she had ever seen, Emma decided, while he leaned forward to gently kiss her lips.

"Thank you, my love," he murmured.

Butterflies danced in Emma's stomach. He always made her feel pleasantly faint. They had been engaged for a month and half, and she still couldn't believe her luck. Andrew was not just handsome, he was also the kindest man she had ever met. Ever willing to help out a neighbor, volunteering his Saturday afternoons at the local youth center to help kids with needs, and always, always perceptive of her desires. She loved him very much.

The shrill ring of the phone interrupted her reverie. At the sound, a dark shadow wiped the smile from Andrew's face and the butterflies in Emma's stomach disappeared; cold spidery legs of anxiety replaced them. Since Christmas, the sound of the phone had

grown ominous. Every call seemed to bring tidings of disaster instead of happiness. Tonight was New Year's Eve and they were set to go out to celebrate the third millennium with a couple of close friends. Emma hoped that a bit of merriment would take Andrew's mind off of the loss of friends that he had suffered so very recently. She fiercely hoped that it was a wrong number.

"Hello," Andrew said into the mouthpiece.

Emma watched his face intently. "Oh no," she murmured when Andrew closed his eyes and a pained expression contorted his handsome features.

She waited breathlessly until he hung up the phone. When he turned around to face her, there were tears in his eyes. Emma gulped, trying to find her voice yet scared to ask what the news was. "Who--" she croaked. She didn't need to finish the sentence.

"Kimberly," Andrew whispered. "They found her in her apartment, a few hours ago. Same as the others: a single knife wound to the stomach."

"Who could be doing such things?" Emma demanded to know, grief making her voice sound harsh. "Kimmy was the sweetest girl! Why did she have to die?" Tears had begun to well in her eyes and stream down her face. They left streaks of mascara on her cheeks but Emma didn't care. Who could celebrate when a psychopathic serial killer was loose in the city, striking down their friends?

"Emma--" Andrew gathered her in his arms, pulling her close to his chest and stroking her hair for a few moments before he led her to the bed. He sat her down on the edge before taking a seat beside her. He took her right hand between his and held it.

"Emma... There's something I need to tell you. Something I can no longer keep from you."

Emma used her left hand to wipe the tears from her cheeks. "What is it?" she asked cautiously. She was startled to find there were still secrets between them. "We are going to get married next month," she added. "You can tell me anything. For better or for worse, that's the vow we will take, remember?"

For an instant, the corners of his mouth curled into a sad smile. "I know," he said. "This is a secret not lightly divulged, even to a future wife. The knowledge can be dangerous."

"You're scaring me," Emma said, fighting down nausea.

"I'm sorry," Andrew said. "I'm trying to gather up my courage... Emma... I'm not an

ordinary man. I'm a witch."

"What?" Emma cried out, believing she must have misunderstood. "If this is your idea of trying to make me feel better--"

He raised his face so his eyes met hers. He shook his head. "It's not," he said quietly. "I am a witch."

"Oh." Emma didn't know what else to say. She didn't even know what it meant, exactly. "You mean, you fly on a broom stick?" she ventured.

Again the sad smile made a fleeting appearance. "No, nothing like that. We help people. We aid them in making tough choices in their lives, finding the answers to difficult questions. Sometimes, I can catch glimpses of the future..."

"That is good, right?" Emma asked. "Why didn't you tell me before? Why would it be dangerous to know that you do this?"

"Because there is another world beside ours," Andrew said. "A world of evil. Filled with demons and warlocks and practitioners of black magic. I think someone from that world murdered Kim and Megan and Evan. They were not merely my friends; they were members of my coven. A witches' circle," he explained quickly.

"Oh," Emma said again. "Is that why the police can't find the killer?"

Andrew nodded.

Emma's eyes widened. "But... But that means that..."

Andrew nodded again. "Yes. I'm in danger. I'm the last of our coven. I fear that, for whatever reason he is hunting us, he won't rest until he's killed us all."

"No!" Emma cried. "I won't let him!" She flung her arms around her fiancé's neck and sobbed against his shoulder. "You have to do something! I can't lose you. Can't you stop being a witch? Maybe then he'll leave you alone."

Andrew allowed her to cry and calm down before he pulled away. He placed a finger beneath her chin to lift up her face. "No," he said, his gaze boring deep into her eyes. "I can't stop being a witch any more than I can stop being a man. It's who I am."

"But--" Emma opened her mouth to protest when Andrew held up a warning hand.

"Shh," he urged. "I heard something."

Emma's ears pricked up while a cold, clammy hand wrapped around her heart. Then she heard it too. Heavy footfalls on the stairs, one after another, moving up.

"We have to hurry!" Emma whispered harshly, pulling Andrew to the window. "We can climb out."

Andrew shook his head. "It's useless to run," he said. "He'll find me soon enough. I better have it out right now with whomever they sent." He looked around quickly. "There," he pointed at the tall closet that held their clothes. "Hide in there."

Emma protested that she wasn't going to leave his side, when Andrew shoved her inside the closet without further ado. "Stay there," he told her. "No matter what happens; no matter what you hear. Promise me, Emma. Promise!"

"I promise," she whispered in a tear-filled voice. "I love you."

"I love you, too." Andrew shut the door.

Emma waited in the darkness. Ignorant of what went on outside her small enclosure she strained her ears, and heard nothing. After a few seconds she cautiously pushed the door open a tiny crack so she could see into the room. She had promised Andrew she'd stay put, and that's what she'd do, but she needed to see.

Andrew was digging through his chest of drawers beside the bed. He pulled out a few sprays of some plant or other. Lavender, Emma noted, when she recognized the tiny flowers.

Emma jumped when the door slammed open, crashing into the wall. In barged the ugliest creature she had ever seen. It took every ounce of willpower she possessed not to scream at the sight. He was tall; easily six foot four and broad-shouldered. However, neither his height nor girth terrified her. The pointed ears, the glaring red and black markings, and the row of tiny sharp teeth bared in an evil grin did.

Andrew held the bunch of twigs in front of him and began to chant.

"Evil is approaching;
Let Darkness be withstood;
Blanket me with your defense;
Protect me with the power of Good."

The creature –Emma couldn't think of it as a man- howled as if in pain and took a lumbering step toward Andrew. Her fiancé kept chanting, his voice growing louder and more desperate as the creature advanced.

A knife, the blade long and undulating, gleamed in the monster's claw. He didn't speak, merely growled and grunted. Time slowed down to a near halt and events happened in a sluggish motion. Emma's eyes grew so wide they nearly fell out of their sockets while she watched with growing horror as the scene played out.

The creature's fist moving forward. The long knife sparkling in the lamplight. Steel point entering Andrew's stomach. Red flower blooming on the white shirt. Blade disappearing deeper and deeper into Andrew. His mouth opening in a silent scream. Sprig of lavender dropping from strengthless hands to fall on the floor at his feet. His knees buckling. Andrew sagging into a crumpled heap on the floor.

Emma couldn't help the sob of anguish that escaped her throat when she witnessed this terrible creature murder her fiancé before her eyes.

The large, red head swiveled slowly in her direction. Her breath hitched and the sob cut short. Black eyes penetrated the gloom of the closet, settling on her with terrifying clarity.

When the creature's gaze met hers, Emma knew her life was forfeit. She was going to follow her fiancé into death within the next few seconds.

Too frightened to watch and see it coming, she closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable.

Nothing happened.

It was at least five minutes later that Emma dared peek through her lashes. The room appeared deserted; there was no sign of the giant anywhere. Cautiously, she pushed the door of the closet open wider and peered out. She was alone.

Andrew's lifeless body, resting in a pool of blood, formed the only evidence that it had not been a bad dream.

Nobody would believe her story, Emma realized. What crazy tale could she tell them? That Andrew was a witch and that a red-and-black creature was sent up from hell to kill him? If she gave them that explanation, they'd think that grief made her insane and lock her up instead of the killer.

That would never do.

Her eye caught sight of the knife, discarded beside her fiancé's body. It was her only link to the killer. She stooped and picked it up to hide it in a drawer before she dialed 9-1-1.

NEW YEAR'S DAY 2000, UNDERWORLD

"Belthazor," Vornac greeted him when the demon returned to his Underworld chambers.

Belthazor gave a start at the unexpected presence but he quickly recovered. "The witches are dead," he reported. "All of them. The Source should be happy."

"He wants to see you."

Tiny alarm bells went off in Belthazor's head. "See me?" he asked. "Why? I did as I was ordered."

"You better come right away," Vornac said. He sounded grave.

Anxious, Belthazor donned his robe, pulled up the hood as was customary when demons visited the Source, and followed Vornac to the inner chambers of the Underworld.

They stopped outside the doorway. "Go ahead," Vornac said. The guards stepped aside at a wave of his hand. "He's waiting for you."

Belthazor hesitated a moment more, then he pulled the cowl of his robe a little further down his face and entered.

"Belthazor!" the Source bellowed so the walls shook. Belthazor inclined his head even further.

"You killed the witches?"

"Yes, as you commanded," Belthazor replied meekly. He still wasn't sure whether the Source's summons was a good or a bad sign.

"However, you left a witness ALIVE!" The walls shook even harder and Belthazor cringed before the sheer power of the Source's anger. "WHY?"

Belthazor shrugged. "The creature in the closet? She was a mere human. I was sent to assassinate the witches. Nobody told me I should kill her too."

The Source roared. "Don't smart mouth me, half-breed! The woman saw you."

Belthazor protested. "She's as insignificant as a bug to us. She can do no harm. Nobody will believe her if she ever tells her story."

"Loose ends have a way of finding you when you least expect it," the Source growled. "Mark my words. You are growing sloppy, Belthazor. I have neither need nor tolerance for slipshod demons."

Belthazor looked up. Was this his final hour? Was the Source going to execute him?

"However, you have served me well over the years," the ruler of the Underworld continued. "Vornac convinced me that your flippant attitude the result of boredom. Therefore, I have a further assignment for you. An undertaking that even you will find challenging. And the reward will be to your liking, too, I believe." One of his hands disappeared within his heavy robes, and when it reappeared, he was holding a small, glowing orb in his long fingers. "Remember this?"

Belthazor's eyes narrowed. "My father's soul. You promised to give it back to me, some day."

"You remember well," the Source commented. "I have ordered the Triad to kill a couple of witches and steal their Book. It turns out they find it not as simple as it would seem. I assign you to aid them in their quest. You will answer directly to them, and they will see to your reward. Do your job well, and the soul is yours."

"No problem," Belthazor asked. "So, who are the witches we're up against?"

"Three witches," the Source said. "The prophesized sisters. The Charmed Ones."

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